

## Chapter 168

AEKERIA

Aekeira felt like she was on fire. Her jaws ached, and her throat felt well-used. But she was so aroused, even the soft breeze seemed too much on her sensitive skin. Aekeira was ready for anything he wanted.

Until his hand reached for the whip again.

Her eyes fixed on the sturdy whip Lord Vladya held, and a wave of apprehension rolled through her. She tried her best to stay calm, forcing herself to breathe evenly. When he raised the whip, her heart skipped a beat, and she squeezed her eyes shut, bracing for the strike.

Where would it land, her thighs, her stomach, or where she was even more vulnerable...

A helpless cry escaped her lips. She tried to squeeze her legs together, but the bounds stopped her. Aekeira waited, tense, expecting the blow.

But it never came.

Slowly, she opened her eyes. Vladya was watching her, his brows furrowed in deep thought. The whip had lowered, hanging limply in his hand as if his will to strike had vanished.

"I'm... confused," Vladya muttered, almost to himself. Conflicted. "There are so many voices in my head—all screaming, all telling me how to hurt and destroy. But when it comes down to it, when I raise the whip on you, they fall silent."

Bewilderment was evident in his voice. "He wanted this, the beast. But when I raise the whip... the urge disappears. Replaced by this need to protect you."

Aekeira blinked at him, trying to make sense of his words. She didn't fully understand. Not what he was saying, nor what it meant for them.

"The urge is still there. I still want to use it," he said, his grip on the whip tightening. "But not on you." Yellow flashed in his dark, wild eyes. "Tell me someone who has hurt you."

Aekeira's heart raced. "I-I..." Her mind blanked as she struggled to process his demand.

"Give me a name," Lord Vladya growled through gritted teeth, as if he were barely holding back the storm. He looked savage, feral, and deeply enraged. "Who has hurt you recently? Give me someone on whom I can unleash this darkness inside me."

A name surfaced in her mind before she could stop it. "Slavemaster Tyke," she blurted out. Then immediately regretted it, biting her lip. "Forget I said anything—"

Vladya's expression darkened further. His voice was icy, controlled. "Was it before or after the warning I issued him?"

"Lord Vladya..." Aekeira tried to avoid his gaze. She knew the dangers too well—slaves who reported slavemasters or soldiers often found themselves in even more perilous situations. She had learned that lesson from Amie. There was never true safety in speaking out.

"Was it before or after?" he snapped.

She swallowed hard, her voice barely a whisper. "After. But—"

Lord Vladya grabbed the discarded sheet and threw it over her, covering her exposed body. "Yaz!" he barked, his voice reverberating off the stone walls of the chamber. "Get in here. Now."

The soldier entered, and Aekeira turned her face to the side, swallowing her sound of embarrassment at being caught in such a humiliating position.

Yaz, however, remained stoic. His eyes fixed forward, his voice as emotionless as always. "Yes, my lord?"

"Bring me Tyke," Lord Vladya commanded, his tone as sharp as the whip he clutched tightly. "Right this instant."

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When the door opened once more, Yaz entered, the slavemaster Tyke trailing nervously behind. Glancing around the room in confusion, he cleared his throat. "My Lord, y-you sent for me...?"

Vladya stopped his pacing, turning his full attention to the slavemaster. "Kneel, Tyke."

Tyke dropped to his knees.

"You've earned a reputation as one of the best masters in the fortress," Lord Vladya said smoothly. "And for that, I have chosen to give you an honor. You will be on the receiving end of this whip. What do you have to say to that?"

Tyke's throat bobbed. His gaze locked with Aekeira's on the bed, and a resentful glare contorted his features. Then, he looked up at Lord Vladya, puffing out his chest. "It will be an honor. As My Lord wishes."

Lord Vladya positioned himself, and the first crack of the whip sliced through the air. Followed by another, and another.

Slavemaster Tyke tried to stifle his cries, but after the fourth lash, he was openly screaming.

Aekeira tried to count the lashes but lost track after thirty. Deep welts and bruises crisscrossed his back, each strike leaving a fresh mark.

Lord Vladya showed no mercy, his arm rising and falling with unrestrained power. Tyke's flesh became a raw, bloody mess.

By the gods. Is this what was meant for her? Aekeira shuddered. No wonder he had warned her, urged her to run.

Unable to bear the sight any longer, she buried her head in the silken sheets, her body wracked with tremors at every strike. Arousal waned, leaving her cold despite the warmth of the sheets around her.

Finally, the strokes ceased. Only the slavemaster's whimpers and ragged breaths remained.

Tentatively, she lifted her head, peeking out from beneath the sheets. Slavemaster Tyke lay crumpled on the floor, his body battered and bleeding.

Lord Vladya crouched before him, lifting the man's chin casually, forcing him to meet his eyes.

"I lied, Tyke," Lord Vladya said calmly. "This is not an honor strike. This is a punishment."

He nodded toward Aekeira, who flinched at the acknowledgment. "You hurt her." His hand caressed a trail of blood from the slavemaster's cheek. "The next time you do, I will have your colleagues whip you in front of the entire square, where every slave and master alike will witness it. Do you want that?"

Slavemaster Tyke's eyes went wide, terror flashing across his face as tears streamed down his cheeks. "No, Your Highness. Please, I swear on my life it will never happen again!"

"From today onward, you are responsible for her protection," Lord Vladya continued coolly. "Ensure that none of the other slavemasters mistreat, overwork, or even look at her the wrong way. If I receive even a whisper of a single complaint... you will answer for it. Do you understand?"